



Office of Civil Rights

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PROVIDING QUALITY SERVICES TO CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES

THE KEY TO QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE

The key to providing quality services to customers with disabilities is to remember that all customers are individuals. People with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes with diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs, and preferences – just like every other customer. There are an estimated 54 million people with disabilities, or 20% of the American population – the nation's largest minority group.

Below are some basic tips for interacting with customers who have disabilities. Keep in mind that in most cases, the best way to learn how to accommodate customers with disabilities is to ask them directly. When interacting with customers with disabilities, appropriate etiquette is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Listen and learn from what the customer tells you regarding his or her needs.

Most disabilities occur after childhood as a result of injury, disease, or disorders. Only one out of every six disabilities is present at birth. Two people with a similar disability may not have similar needs.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

- Get the customer's attention before starting a conversation. Move into the person's field of vision or tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm.
- Identify who you are – introduce yourself or show your name badge or business card.
- Look directly at the customer – face the light; speak clearly and in a normal tone of voice; use short, simple sentences; and keep your hands away from your face.
- Ask the customer if it would be helpful to communicate by writing or by using a computer terminal to type back and forth.
- Speak directly to the customer, not to a sign language interpreter.
- If you telephone a customer who is deaf or hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- Use the Telecommunications Relay Service (711) to call a customer who uses a TTY or other telecommunications device.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

- Speak as you approach a customer. State clearly who you are and speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Never distract a dog guide, or try to pet one without first asking the owner.
- To guide a person who is blind, let him or her grasp your arm just above the elbow and the person will follow a half step behind. Note: Some individuals may prefer to put a hand on your forearm or shoulder.
- Offer assistance if the customer appears to have difficulty locating a specific service area. Be descriptive when giving directions – give the customer verbal information that is visually obvious to people who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, say that there are a half dozen steps going down, or tell the person to take the next right and the office they seek is the third on the left.
- If you offer a seat, gently guide the customer's hand to the back or arm of the chair.
- Ask if the customer needs assistance signing forms. Offer to guide the person's hand to the appropriate space for signature.
- When dealing with money transactions, tell the customer the denominations when you count out change.
- Tell the customer when you are leaving – never leave a person who is blind talking to an empty space.
- Make sure the customer has picked up all personal possessions before leaving.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH MOBILITY DISABILITIES

- Offer assistance if the customer appears to have difficulty opening doors.
- Make sure there is a clear path of travel. Remove obstacles such as boxes or chairs.
- Put yourself at a wheelchair user's eye level. If possible, sit next to the customer when having a conversation.
- Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device. Ask first before pushing someone's wheelchair.
- If counters or reception desks are too high, provide a clipboard as a writing surface. When appropriate, step around to the customer side of the desk or counter during your interaction.
- Offer a chair if a customer will be standing for a long time, or invite the customer to come to the front of the line.
- Never distract a service animal, or try to pet one without first asking the owner.
- If you telephone the customer, allow the telephone to ring longer than usual to allow extra time for the customer to reach the phone.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

- Be patient, flexible, and supportive. Take time to understand the customer and make sure the customer understands you.
- Offer assistance with and/or extra time for completion of forms, writing checks, understanding written instructions, and/or decision-making. Wait for the customer to accept the offer of assistance and do not over-assist.
- Speak clearly. Do not shout, exaggerate, or over-pronounce. Use a normal tone of voice and normal speed unless asked to slow down.
- Keep your concepts clear and concise. Use precise, plain language and avoid complex sentences. Sometimes it is helpful to break down complicated concepts or processes into steps and deal with them sequentially.
- Be prepared to provide an explanation more than once, or to rephrase.
- A customer who has difficulty reading or writing may prefer to take forms home to complete.
- Consider moving to a quiet or private location, if in a public area with many distractions.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH SYSTEMIC DISABILITIES

- Many disabilities are not apparent to a casual observer – these are sometimes called “hidden” or “invisible” disabilities. Examples are diabetes, heart disease, cancer, epilepsy, sickle-cell anemia, organ transplant, or emphysema. Remember that these conditions may present many limitations to the customer’s life activities, similar to others described in this fact sheet.
- Some disabilities are variable from day to day. Some conditions are progressive, becoming more severe over time. Keep this in mind if you notice an individual who appears to be walking, talking or seeing fine one day, but not the next.
- Some disabling conditions involve pain or require medication or treatments that have side effects. This may be the reason why an individual with a disability exhibits restlessness, drowsiness, slurred speech, slowed reflexes, even irritability.
- Some people who are chemically sensitive experience uncomfortable or even debilitating symptoms in the presence of certain substances, such as scented personal products, cleaning products, and new carpeting or furniture. If necessary, open a window or move to a different location.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH SPEECH DISABILITIES

- If you do not understand something, do not pretend that you do. Ask the customer to repeat what was said, then repeat it back to the customer. Consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the customer if this is acceptable.
- Be patient; take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the customer is saying; focus on listening and communicating.

- Avoid barriers like glass partitions and distractions, such as noisy, public places.
- Do not speak for the customer or attempt to finish her or his sentences. However, if communication remains difficult, ask permission to try to finish sentences or clarify ideas.
- If you and the customer cannot work out a communication difficulty, ask if there is someone who could interpret on the customer's behalf.
- If you telephone a customer who has a speech disability and find that communication is not effective, consider using the Speech-to-Speech Relay Service (1-877-833-6741).
- Use the Telecommunications Relay Service (711) to call a customer who uses a TTY or other telecommunications device.

REMEMBER . . .

- Treat the customer with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Listen to the customer.
- Help the customer feel comfortable.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Offer assistance but do not insist.
- Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help.
- Provide access to facilities and services.
- Relax and deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm, professional manner.

Call 206-296-7705 to contact the King County Disability Compliance Specialist for technical assistance, resource referrals, and staff training.

Adapted from a July 1998 publication of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, now the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the U.S. Department of Labor (www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/publicat.htm).